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Scalable IT Project Delivery Success Model

By Stephen W. Warren, CIO, Department of Veterans Affairs



Stephen W. Warren

In 2009, we took a hard look at the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) IT organization, and we saw a lot we didn't like. Our development and delivery of new IT capabilities was "off." Projects frequently got off-track and were taking longer and longer to deliver—if they were delivered at all. Fewer than 30 percent of our products were delivered on time. We were arguably the largest consolidated IT organization in the world, yet we struggled to solve a basic problem: In an organization this large, how to select the right IT projects to tackle, fund them, and keep them moving through on-time completion? Then, we found the answer.

The solution wasn't more technology. It was simpler, more human. What we needed was a culture of meeting our delivery commitments. So we mandated a development process where success hinges on delivering what we committed. Quite simply, project managers and other stakeholders became directly accountable for their deliverables and our product delivery improved dramatically.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, for the fourth year in a row, our on-time delivery rate for IT projects topped 80 percent. For those projects that missed their scheduled deliveries, we still managed to deliver 27.1 percent within one month of the initial due dates. And, regardless of date, we've consistently delivered 98 percent of our IT product commitments.

These percentages aren't just numbers to us. Successful, timely product delivery means our customers have the tools they need to perform their jobs. And it is our customers who deliver health care and many other services and benefits to our nation's Veterans. They rely on our technology—and they need that technology to continuously improve.

That's why our product delivery

success is important. That's why commitment to delivery is so important to our process. When we add just one percentage point to our on-time delivery rate, it means we are, ultimately, helping the VA to better serve Veterans.

In specific terms, our first step was developing the Project Management Accountability System, or PMAS, which mandated—and established a tracking mechanism to ensure—that every IT project delivered customer-facing functionality every six months or less. PMAS ensures that the customer, IT project team, vendors, and all stakeholders engaged in a project are focused on and accountable for meeting a single goal: To get the product delivered on-time.

In the first year of PMAS implementation, VA increased its on-time milestone delivery rate from less than 30 percent to 89 percent for all IT project milestones. And in FY 2009 alone, VA avoided at least \$200 million in costs by stopping 45 under-resourced projects.

We also honed in on the people factor—who we had and how we organized them. Over the years, fiefdoms had grown within VA that kept IT staff aligned to people and offices rather than projects. There was also a shortage of key staff, and a need to train existing staff in order to meet the demands of ever-accelerating IT innovation.

So we hired people—we continue to hire people. We train them in Agile development, maintain a system where we dynamically assign people to projects that is light on HR paperwork, and closely manage the hours



“Project Management Accountability System established a tracking mechanism to ensure every IT project delivered customer-facing functionality every six months or less,”

required and spent, so that projects have the right people on-board when needed. The result is a competency organization where projects are supported and staff are continually kept engaged.

Then there was an urgent need to redefine how we managed contracts. Our acquisition process was long, averaging six months. And we found ourselves with sufficient underperforming contractors as to warrant a new approach. By creating a large, umbrella contract encompassing 300 qualified and trusted vendors, from which we can select for various projects as needed, we have reduced our contracting process to 45 days. Last but not least, we knew that in addition to the above organizational changes, we had to be proactive—planning ahead for everything, including product requirements, funding, and product management after deployment.

In short, we built a system and a culture where planning happens before a project gets the green light. Under PMAS, a project does not start unless it is funded, the required staff resources are available, and the product/business requirements are clearly outlined and agreed upon.

We will continue to refine this process and grow our success. By FY 2016, senior leaders expect that VA will develop and deploy new IT capabilities across the enterprise in increments not to exceed three months wherever possible. Value-driven execution through improved analysis and interpretation of PMAS data will also help increase frequency of delivery.

If I can offer advice to organizations facing dilemmas similar to what VA faced years ago: Be bold. We made sweeping changes across a huge organization and have enjoyed dramatic improvements. [CR](#)